WALKER

The boy who can talk to dogs

Shoo Rayner



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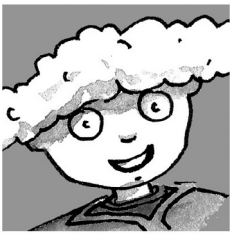
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'How many more red lights?' Mum growled as she screeched the car to a halt. 'Oh no!' she groaned, glaring across the street. 'That's disgusting. Fancy letting your dog poo right there on the pavement.'

Walker looked out of the window. A poodle gazed lovingly back at him, while it did its business right in front of Poundland! The dog's owner pretended she had nothing to do with it. She held the lead behind her back and stared up to the sky as if she had a deep interest in jumbo jets. Then she pulled a pink plastic bag out of her pocket and put her hand inside it.

'At least she's taking it home.' Walker thought he really wouldn't mind having to pick up poo in a plastic bag, if *only* he could have a dog of his own. 'I wish I had a dog.'

'Oh for goodness sake!' Mum rolled her eyes. 'How many times have we been through this?'

'Millions,' Walker sighed, 'millions and trillions!'

The lights turned green and the car rolled forward. The city streets passed by, full of dogs

being walked on leads. He named the breeds as they passed by.

'Labrador … staffy … pug … husky … spaniel…'

Mum flicked him a glance in the rear-view mirror. She didn't have to say a word, her look said it all. Walker knew there was no point talking about it.

They were driving back from visiting Aunt Lizzie and his cousin Poppy for the day.

Poppy had rats. They weren't dogs, but at least they were pets – and they were all hers. Stinky, Scratchy, Bella and Blue whizzed around the cage doing tricks, running upside down in their wheel and squeezing through a spaghetti-like maze of plastic tubes that threaded their way up, down and across Poppy's bedroom.

'She likes you!' said Poppy, putting Bella on Walker's shoulder. The rat examined him with her pink eyes and sniffed his face, tickling his neck with her long, white, hairy whiskers. He squeezed his eyes shut and scrunched up his neck when she poked her wet little nose in his ear, as if searching for a secret stash of sunflower seeds inside. He

could hear Bella's tiny breath, almost as if she was talking to him.



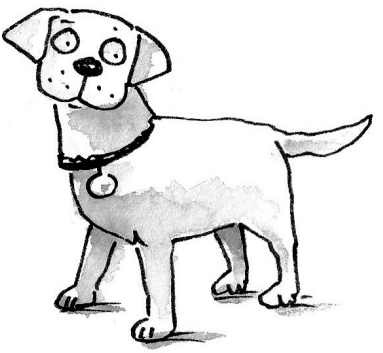
Back in the car, Walker remembered the feeling as he watched a large woman in a blue furry coat walk by with a tiny dog tucked under her arm. Sometimes Poppy would take Bella out for a walk in her coat pocket!

'Maybe I could have a teeny, weeny, itsy-bitsy, little chihuahua,' Walker suggested. 'They're really small. It could live in my pocket. You wouldn't even know it was there!'

Every time Walker suggested a different type of dog, praising all the virtues that the breed was well-known for, there was always the same emphatic answer:

'NO!'

A Labrador? Too bouncy!



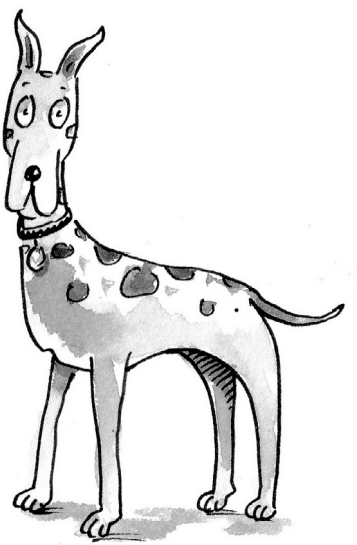
Jack Russell? Too snappy!



Sheepdog? They need too much exercise!



Great Dane? Do you know how much they eat!?



Poodle? Old lady dogs!



Collie? Too much fur!



Fur was the problem. If Mum got too close to dogs, she suffered an allergic reaction. Her voice would go all squeaky and she would pant like a

terrier that had been chasing its tail all day. She had to carry a syringe full of medicine in her handbag, just in case it got really bad. Walker didn't want to see her get ill, of course, and knew he had to think of her health first.

But he couldn't get over the idea he was *meant* to have a dog.

Walker's dad, on the other hand, just didn't like dogs. He was a quiet, gentle, cat-loving man. Lucy Lou, a plump tabby cat, curled up on his lap every night, sleeping through all the interesting TV programmes he liked to watch about history and science.

'Poor Lucy Lou!' he would say. 'Can you imagine the stress she would be put under if we had a dog in the house?'

So all Walker could do was dream of growing up and having his own place one day where he could share his life with his very own canine friend.

The city outskirts sped by. Walker flicked through the pictures of dogs on his phone and sighed deeply. Growing up seemed to be taking forever.



Mum leaned forward over the steering wheel, peered up through the windscreen and tutted. 'That man gets everywhere,' she muttered.

They were going past a huge poster of Arlington Wherewithal which read: 'You too can be as rich as me!' Arlington Wherewithal was a famous businessman, who happened to live in Foxley, the village where Walker lived with his mum and dad. Arlington's giant image stared down at them. His piercing blue eyes glittered under his wild, bushy eyebrows.

'Why's his picture up there?' Walker asked.



'Oh, it'll be another of his TV programmes or money-making schemes,' Mum sighed. 'People give him money so he can tell them how he got so rich. Then he gets even richer!'

Walker had known Arlington Wherewithal all his life. Not personally, like a family friend, but Arlington opened fêtes and did other things around Foxley. He made speeches and gave the prizes at Walker's school and always made sure his picture appeared in the paper. He was always on the TV too, telling everyone they could all be as rich as he was – if they just pulled their socks up!

Walker often saw Arlington walking his dogs through the village. He had two pointers. They were gun dogs, taught to fetch the birds that Arlington shot each year. In the shooting season, Foxley village reverberated to the din of Arlington's shotguns *blam-blamming* away in Foxley Woods.

Arlington lived in Foxley Manor, an enormous country mansion. He'd made a fortune from building loads of new houses on the edge of his land, making the village three times bigger than it used to be. He'd made sure they were well hidden behind Foxley Woods so he wouldn't have to see them.

Something caught Walker's eye, making him forget all about Arlington. He strained to look out of the window. The seat belt snapped tight, holding him back.

On the pavement, a woman was walking six, no, wait … seven dogs! A Labrador, Dalmatian, two sausage dogs, a Pomeranian, a West Highland terrier and a miniature bulldog. They trotted happily together on their leads, looking like a bunch of five-year-old kids on a school outing.



'She's got seven dogs!' Walker exclaimed. 'That is *so* unfair!'

'They're not hers,' Mum said, calmly.

'How do you know?'

'Look at her bag.'

A square bag dangled from the woman's shoulder. Printed on the side was a silhouette of someone walking three dogs. The message underneath read – 'Walkies! Get the app and book your dog a walk right now!'

'What does it mean?' Walker asked.

'She walks dogs for other people,' Mum explained. 'Busy people who don't have time to walk their own dogs, so they pay people to do it for them.'

'What!?' Walker's eyes popped wide open. 'You mean you can get paid for walking dogs? Well! Now I know what I want to do when I grow up! When can I leave school?'

Mum shook her head in dismay. 'Dogs! Dogs! Dogs! That's all you ever think about!'

Walker was silent for the rest of the journey home. He was thinking deep thoughts and planning a cunning plan. Maybe there was a way to sort of have a dog of his own?

